

Santa Rosa Post Office and Federal Building
401 Fifth Street
Santa Rosa
Sonoma County
California

HABS No. CA-2951

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY CA-2051

SANTA ROSA POST OFFICE AND FEDERAL BUILDING

Location: 401 Fifth Street, Santa Rosa, Sonoma County,
California.

USGS Santa Rosa Quadrangle, Universal Transverse
Mercator Coordinates: 10.524740.4254490.

Present Owner: Santa Rosa Urban Renewal Agency (1977).

Present Occupant: Vacant.

Present Use: Vacant, to be demolished for a downtown shopping
center.

Significance: The Santa Rosa Post Office and Federal Building,
constructed 1909, was designed by James Knox
Taylor, FAIA of the Treasury Department. It was
the first Federal structure built in Santa Rosa.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1908-1909.
2. Architect: The building was designed by James Knox
Taylor, FAIA, Supervising Architect, Department of the
Treasury (1897-1912).
3. Original and subsequent owners: The United States
Government retained ownership until 1966, when a new Post
Office building was constructed in the first phase of an
urban renewal project. In 1967, the General Services
Administration sold the building to the County of Sonoma,
who used it for school purposes until 1977, when it was
acquired by the City of Santa Rosa Redevelopment Agency.
4. Builder, contractors: The Hoyt Brothers, well-known
local contractors, were the builders. The companies
involved in supplying labor and materials were: Henry
Kroncke, with Santa Clara Planning Mill; J.C. Mailer

Hardware Company; George Reilly, Stone Contractor; Mark McConnell, electrician; and Lomont and Company, painters.

5. Original plans and construction: On March 8, 1906, Representative D.C. McKinlay of California's Second District introduced H.R.16382 in the House of Representatives. The object of this bill was "to provide for the purchase of a site and erection of a public building at Santa Rosa, California," the total cost of which was not to exceed "the sum of one hundred thousand dollars." Shortly thereafter the April 1906 earthquake struck leaving a large portion of downtown Santa Rosa devastated. The problems of rebuilding the downtown section prompted C.C. Donovan, a local hop dealer, to write James Knox Taylor, asking him to give priority to the construction of the city's new Post Office (Donovan to Taylor, October 18, 1907). Donovan noted that the present office was housed in a temporary galvanized iron building surrounded by the rubble and debris left by the earthquake. Approximately one year later, Hoyt Brothers, the contractors, were awarded the bid to erect and complete the Federal building in the city of Santa Rosa.
6. Alterations and additions: In 1926 an addition was made to the rear of the building to enlarge the work room capacity, and the mail platform was modified to accommodate the addition. A third federal office space was constructed to the west mezzanine enclosing the open stairwell.

In 1967 the County of Sonoma, after purchasing the structure, made alterations to the work room to accommodate their data processing center. This work included removing the existing public counters and screen, postal boxes, adding new air conditioning, adding new partitions and lowering the ceiling of the work space using a suspended ceiling. The major interior architectural features were not significantly destroyed.

B. Historical Events and Persons Connected with the Structure:

1. James Knox Taylor: The building was designed by James Knox Taylor, FAIA, Supervising Architect, Department of the Treasury (1897-1912). Taylor graduated as a special student from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1879. He was in private practice until going to work for

the Treasury Department where he became the Supervising Architect from 1897 to 1912. It was during these fifteen years that Taylor became known as the "National Architect" because of the improved character and designs of Federal buildings under his supervision. Examples of Taylor's designs indicate that he was concerned with an architecture that would harmonize with local history, climate, and environment. Taylor's retirement in 1912 caused Charles McKim of McKim, Meade and White to state that it was a national calamity. Taylor subsequently became the head of the Department of Architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Richard C. Maclaurin, President of MIT stated that Taylor was one of the most important additions to the Institute because of his powerful influence on the architecture of the country. At MIT, Taylor would be able to continue the work of improving the nation's architecture through his influence on the architects of the future. In 1914, he left MIT and practiced architecture in Detroit, Philadelphia, and Tampa, Florida where he died (August 28, 1929).

C. Sources of Information:

1. Architect's drawings: Brown lines of the original contract drawings, and original shop drawings for the Millwork, ornamental plaster work, cast iron light fixtures, stone and marble works are still in existence. The contract drawings include architectural, structural, mechanical, and electrical drawings. These brown lines drawings are from the collection of Dan Peterson. Photocopies are included in the photo-data set.
2. Bibliography:
 - a. Primary and unpublished:

National Archives and Records Service, Santa Rosa Post Office. NARS Record Gr. 121, PBS.

National Archives and Record Service. Bureau of Appointments, James Knox Taylor. NARS Record Gr. 56, Department of Treasury.
 - b. Secondary and published:

Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Technology Review, 1912, 14.

Newman, William A. "The Santa Rosa Post Office Building." The Architect & Engineer of California XXI:49-51.

____ "The Development of Federal Architecture in California--Progress from Early Types Shown by Recent Designs." The Architect & Engineer of California LIV:67-73.

Santa Rosa Press Democrat. Issues of March 9, 1906; January 15, 1909; August 9, 1909; January 14, 1910; February 18, 1910; March 3, 1910; March 9, 1910.

Prepared by Dan Peterson, AIA
1049 Fourth Street
Santa Rosa, California
November 1977

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The Santa Rosa Post office and Federal Building, designed by James Knox Taylor FAIA, of the Treasury Department, illustrates the beginning of a new design trend for smaller government buildings in communities throughout California. Later examples of these were designed by Oscar Wenderoth, Treasury Department (supervising architect after Taylor) which show further design refinements with stronger influence of the Spanish Revival style than this building with its Roman details. The building contains one of the most advanced hot water heating systems in California of its time, and was one of the earliest buildings in the state to use mission tile on a hip roof.

2. Condition of fabric: excellent.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: The rectangular building is 82' (seven-bay front) x 52'. Across the front of the two story building is a portico measuring 51' x 13'. The granite steps across the portico extend out another 8'.

2. Foundations: Poured concrete footing with 24" thick brick walls damp-proofed below grade.
3. Wall construction, finish, color: The exterior walls are 18" thick solid-mortared brick construction with every fifth course a header course. Door and window headers are precast reinforced concrete. The water table (from grade to floor line, approximately 4'6") is Indiana Buff Bedford Limestone installed in coursed ashlar (total wall thickness 24"). The stone is anchored to the brick with a metal U strap in the top of the stone at each side of the vertical joints. Granite is used at the rear steps to the basement. The exterior surfaces are plaster with a heavy texture. The stippling is cement wash heavily applied and then raised apparently by a float tool. The string courses, moldings, and frieze decorations are done, in most cases by heavier sections of plaster which contain pea gravel. The stucco is painted. There was some local concern expressed regarding the stuccoing of the brick. Experience had been that the stucco peeled off leaving the building in a delapidated appearance (letter from McKinlay to Taylor, February 26, 1909).

The materials used in construction were listed in correspondence dated December 16, 1908 from the Hoyt Brothers to Taylor: Portland cement of the Golden Gate Brand, Pacific Portland Cement Company; the non-staining cement was LaFarge Extra White from France, distributed by Waterhouse & Price Company, San Francisco; Russian River type of sand; crushed rock from the basalt quarries in Sonoma County (the same material used as cobblestone for streets in Sonoma County and San Francisco) was used as aggregate; Indiana Bedford Limestone and Granite; the brick was from Central Brick Company distributed by Western Building Material Company, San Francisco. Core samples were taken from the brick walls to test their strengths. The compression was 3530 pounds per square inch; the shearing stress was 164 pounds per square inch.

4. Structural system, framing: Exterior walls, basement walls and intermediate first floor walls supporting the mezzanine walls are brick. Floors, ceilings, roof, and partitions are wooden frame with four major trusses supporting the roof framing. Floor and roof sheathing is 1" x 6" laid diagonally on floors and straight on the roof. Structural steel is used to support the wooden floor framing above the basement.

5. Portico: The 51' x 13' portico across the facade has segmentally arched openings which rest on four Indiana Bedford Limestone columns. The column shaft is smooth, sits on a base and is topped with a Composite style cap. The columns shafts have the appropriate entasis. The pilasters on each side of the portico also have (square design) a Composite cap. The steps leading up to the portico are of granite and the floor is concrete topped with terrazzo. On each side of the steps are limestone cheek blocks with elaborate cast iron lighting fixtures. Within the portico is a pendant type cast iron fixture. These fixtures were designed to operate on both gas and electricity. The gas piping to these lights still exist. The portico has a simple cornice with brackets at the eaves.
6. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: There are double doors with transoms at either end of the portico. They are of wood and glass. The doors lead into a main public lobby where the counters were located.
 - b. Windows: All windows are double hung with removeable stops and chain operated sash weights. Glazing is 1/4" plate. They were all designed to operate with a pole. The number of lights in top and bottom sash varies from two over two, to twelve over twelve and twenty over twenty at the lobby windows. The windows are inset into two story recessed panels, with the first story windows having keystones.
7. Roof:
 - a. Shape, covering: The roof on the portico is sloped from the main building at the rate of 2-1/2:12; the main roof is hipped with a slope of 4:12 and 7:12. The roofing material is a Spanish design clay tile with interlocking feature. The tile was pressed and fired by Ludowici Roofing Tile Company. The same company continues to manufacture the tile. The original tile was installed using wire ties nailed to the wood decking and the tile (having a rear lug) was laid on 1" x 2" wooden stripping laid horizontally. The tile lug lapped the wooden strip to hold it in place. The tile edges interlocked to provide a water tight surface.

- b. Cornice, eaves: The roof eaves are elaborately detailed with exposed rafters (6" x 10" with decorative end) and paired wooden brackets supporting an exterior beam.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans:

- a. Basement: There is a full basement with storage, heating equipment, and coal storage areas. Even though the coal chute and storage space was provided, coal was never used.
 - b. Main floor: The center portion of the building contained the work room and the public lobby. On the left side was the post master's office (with access to secret viewing corridors above the work areas) and the assistant postmaster. The right side had the safe, along with the money order and registered mail counters. From the public lobby (left side) was the main stair up to the Internal Revenue offices.
 - c. Mezzanine levels: On the left side there are two offices, a toilet, and safe which were used by the deputy collector, Internal Revenue Service. On the right side there is a store room, swing room (lounge), and main toilet rooms with showers which were used by the employees. This area was accessible by a stair from the work room and could be viewed from the secret viewing corridor.
 - d. Attic: This was accessible from the secret viewing corridors; it provided access to the roof in order to service the flag pole on the ridge.
 - e. Secret viewing corridors: A series of concealed corridors with one way viewing louvers and a series of vertical shafts with ladders provided the postmaster with the ability to go from his office to the basement and attic, seeing all parts of the operation without anyone being able to see him.
2. Stairways: The main stair is an open-well boxed stringer with a u-shaped plan (two intermediate landings). The newel post, railing and turned baluster members are of stained and varnished oak. The bottom treads are curved in a bullnose fashion. This well was enclosed in 1927 when a third office space was added to the west mezzanine.

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3. Flooring: All the floors are exposed white maple wood except in the public lobby, stair, and toilet rooms which are terrazzo with marble dividers and borders. Wooden baseboards are used with wooden floors and marble baseboards with terrazzo floors.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: Plaster over wooden lath with wooden wainscoting is in the work areas and swing room. Marble wainscoting is installed in the toilet and shower room areas. The main lobby area is done in ornamented plaster friezes, pilasters, and ceiling molds. The pilasters are capped with a Composite style plaster cap (similar to the stone caps on the exterior). The frieze details include egg and dart details, dentils, and acorn units at the pilaster. Metal lath is used at the ornament portion of the ceiling to wall transition. The wooden lath on the ceilings are installed on strippings (the wooden lath ceiling runs parallel with framing).
5. Doorways and doors: The door casings are molded oak and terminate at the base with a plinth. The doors are 2-1/4" thick stile and rail doors in three designs: raised panels, five high of oak; a glazed panel above with two raised panels below (glazing varies from clear to obscure) of oak; and a small lower panel and large upper panel with diagonal boards (in basement areas). The obscure glazing is of shingle chip glass and patterned glass (bubble type design).
6. Decorative features, trim: All trim, wood work, counters and doors are of quarter sawn white oak which has been stained and varnished.
7. Hardware: All hardware is plain in a bronze finish. The door locks are mortise type with plain escutcheon plates and oval knobs.
8. Mechanical equipment:
 - a. Heating: The original heating system has been modified and supplemented. The original system was an automatic oil burning plant which operated a hot water heating apparatus. It was one of the first systems of its type in California. This system was made public in the San Francisco Bay Area at the 1915 Exposition in San Francisco. The post office

building system featured an automatic shut off of the fuel system to prevent gas explosions; and a domestic hot water system which provided instant hot water at the lavatories and showers. The system was later converted to natural gas.

- b. Lighting: The original lighting fixtures have been removed. There appears to be some evidence that there were gas operated fixtures (probably because electricity was not dependable).

It was reported that there were four distinct electrical installations: main lighting with feeder from the street; main power with feeder from the street; vault protection; and a telephone system within the building. All of the electrical work was done in metal conduit.

- D. Site: The original site including landscaping and a hitching rail for the horses, has been totally altered; now it is concrete paving. On February 16, 1910 J.W. Roberts wrote Taylor to note that the "blocks forming the concrete driveway have been troweled forming smooth borders around each joint about 2" wide, the remaining surfaces have been 'drawn' slightly with a wooden trowel to form foothold for horses."

Prepared by Dan Peterson, AIA
1049 Fourth Street
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PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

These records were undertaken by the Santa Rosa Housing and Redevelopment Agency in compliance with Executive Order 11593 and a Memorandum of Agreement with the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation as a mitigative effort in the construction of a downtown shopping mall in Santa Rosa, California. John A. Burns AIA was the project consultant. The architectural and historical written data was prepared by Dan Peterson, AIA Architect, preservation consultant to the Santa Rosa Housing and Redevelopment Agency in November 1977. The material was edited in May 1979 by Mary Beth Betts in the HABS office. Photocopies of the original drawings, from the collection of Dan Peterson, are included in the photo-data set. Photographs were taken by Don Meacham, in November 1977.